

VIEWPOINT

Beware the cheap traffic survey: the chances are the contractor is cutting corners

There is no policing of quality of work within the field of traffic data collection. For many years we have come across new entrants to the market that fail within a few years. What were they offering clients? Cheap prices, poor work? How can this happen? Our nearest allied industry, market research, is policed by the Market Research Society, which supports best practice by setting and enforcing industry standards.

Cheap prices generally mean cheap or insufficient labour. All companies must do two things by law: 1. pay at least the minimum wage and 2. employ legal workers only. These add to the cost of surveys so the only way to get the labour element down to the most competitive price is to reduce the amount of labour used. Many times we have visited a site where data is being collected by a woefully low number of staff and we know from having seen the survey specification that the data asked for can't possibly be being collected adequately. How does a client know if that is the case by looking at the report? Only the very experienced can! Data can be manufactured without a trace and it can be virtually impossible to detect, though we do know of occasions when an experienced client has thrown data back at the survey company knowing only too well that nobody was on site or there were road closures there on that day.

How can clients get a fair price? This is the easy part of commissioning a survey. We do the hard work later on site and in the analysis suite. Data collection companies need good, clear, up-to-date information at the enquiry stage. Just because you know the layout of the 'Hanger Lane' gyratory in London or 'Gypsy Corner' in Church Fenton does not mean that an estimator in Leeds does. He needs accurate and up-to-date maps, information on what you are going to do with the data, survey hours, vehicle classes to ensure that the method and price he submits is 100% relevant to your required output from the survey. Queue lengths, for example, need a full specification as there are many ways to measure a queue. All tenderers must be able to submit a bid against an identical specification so that you are not comparing apples with pears. If the lowest bid is more than 20% lower than the other bids then there could be something wrong. Ask questions, get re-assurances.

Clients could have a go at estimating the price themselves – but don't underestimate the skills and costs needed in doing the work. It's not as easy as it looks. A professional team needs office support. Intangible costs soon add up: tendering costs, administration costs, IT costs, direct costs, indirect costs, overheads, finance, report forma-

tion, Quality Assurance costs, and health and safety costs. That 12-page turning count report you receive that looked so expensive is all of a sudden looking a bargain. This is more critical when you are putting together a large bid for consultancy work. We have never heard of a budget being accepted that is £150,000 over the actual amount of work needed but we have on many occasions heard of the reverse, i.e. a survey budget of £50,000 was tendered and the actual work came to £200,000! Nobody wins in this situation.

So we can see there is obviously some close liaison needed between the two parties, not after a specification has been presented or an unrealistic budget has been accepted in an awarded tender.

It's at the specifying stage where surveys' backs can be broken. An extra hour or two in preparing a specification can save dozens of hours post-report and much embarrassment. Talk to subcontractors for advice in preparing your specification. Don't ask for the impossible, we will tell you what is possible and what isn't.

Traffic data collection may not be the most glamorous side of transport consultancy but it is the most important as it is purely collected for the decision-making process, not for fun.

No traffic data company wants to do bad work and it is both parties' responsibilities to ensure that that is not the case on any nature or size of survey. Cheap prices may look a bargain but once it blows up in your face, how are you going to sort it out? The survey company will still invoice you and the chances of your client re-imbursing you for a re-survey are not only minimal but also embarrassing. Get it right first time. Prepare a proper specification: good plans, times, classes, purpose. Check that the survey company has interpreted your specification accurately and make sure they have included everything that you need.

Most importantly, make sure that the winning company is actually capable of doing the work. If they work to ISO then ask for proof that it is up to date and that its content reflects the processes in undertaking traffic surveys and not just processes for filing away paperwork. It has to be utilised in a way that creates a 'learning company'. We all make mistakes on site and, let's face it, nobody can predict site conditions but by having stringent objectives within ISO it forces us to learn from our mistakes and re-visit those objectives. Just because a company has ISO is no guarantee they know how to 'count cars'.

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"Traffic data collection may not be the most glamorous side of transport consultancy but it is the most important."

Mark Mattison is managing director of Sky High Technology, which specialises in traffic data collection.

LETTERS TO THE

Hoon is dictating North West's transport spending priorities

'Hoon breaks RFA rules as £1bn transport package accelerated' was *LTT's* front page lead headline in your last edition (*LTT* 28 Nov). In the article you justify the headline by pointing out that the Government was prepared to break its own rules with regard to how Highways Agency regional schemes are funded for one exceptional case – the A46 between Widmerpool and Newark. This is so but the Government's latest transport funding announcement breaks the Regional Funding Allocation rules in another way as well: It dictates to regions what their priorities should be.

The Government gave the task of recommending transport priorities for non-national schemes to the regions. In so doing, it allowed them to develop their own methodologies for prioritisation. What emerged was deeply disappointing to sustainable transport and environmental bodies because it was very much 'business as usual' – a predominance of road schemes. The North West was not alone in placing too much emphasis on perceived economic benefits (without a proper evidence base) and too little on carbon dioxide emissions and modal shift.

In any event the process was so rushed as to make robust consideration impossible. The environmental and voluntary sectors were excluded from RFA 1 decision-making in most regions. But that is not the point at issue here.

By whatever process it was arrived at, the North West RFA advice, which the Government accepted, was not to fund the SEMMMS (South East Manchester Multi Modal Study) Relief Roads, merely to provide some money towards scheme preparation. Later lobbying of the Government by local authorities promoting the network of new road schemes that make up the SEMMMS 'Relief' Roads led to a ministerial pronouncement only a few months ago – that SEMMMS was too big as one entity and the Government was not prepared to fund it. A possible way forward suggested was for the promoting authorities to split up the schemes into separate entities. This was particularly ironic as it was the Government that packaged several schemes together in the first place and created a multi-modal study out of them for the transport White Paper of 1998.

4NW, the Leaders Forum that is the successor to the North West Regional Assembly, has declared during the round two deliberations (several times) that it will not be altering its advice from round one (it is spectacularly over budget) but will instead merely be reassessing the figures and delivery.

However, as your article explains, transport secretary Geoff Hoon announced that he was providing £165m for the SEMMMS relief roads (which, incidentally have yet to go through the planning process) – subject to a contribution from the RFA pot!

This therefore is an attempt to override the decisions of the regional leaders who have already declared that they have no intention of throwing out any schemes currently in the programme. So, the message appears to be to put the RFA advice out with the paper refuse for recycling. It is clearly irrelevant.

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